

A Short Look at the Etymology of “Melancholy”

by Alec Fraser

“Melancholy,” a very dynamic word, has grown more abstract with time to the point where many may now find it hard to distinguish from depression or sadness. While melancholy is of course very related to depression, its meaning nowadays can denote any feeling from somberly introspective to nostalgic. Different from the modern day use of “depression,” describing the psychological illness, melancholy in both its early days and now is often used to denote a specific personality characteristic of someone, but to see how this came about, it is important to examine the word as it first appeared in ancient Greek.

Originally, the term “melancholy” came from the word “melancholia”, which came from the ancient Greek word “μέλαινα χολή,” or “melaina chole,” which literally meant “black bile.” This “black bile” came from the ancient medical idea of the four humours, or rather, four liquid-like substances found in the body which, when balanced, lead to good health and, when unbalanced, lead to various diseases of both the body and the mind; of course, the idea of a sickness of the mind was far less developed than in recent history. The four humours were blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm, and an overabundance of black bile was said to lead to more depressing emotions such as sadness and prolonged fear.

The term “melancholia” eventually made it into classical Latin around the 5th century, and from there into post-classical Latin. English specifically received this loan word from Old French roughly 100 years after the Norman Conquest of England, circa 1180, then in the form of either “malencolie” or “melancolie.” From this point into the medieval era the definition retained its original meaning of “black bile” and the connoted meaning of this, that one is of “Ill temper, sullenness, brooding, [or] anger,” which carries with it a harsher negatively emotional value than today’s definition does, and can be seen used by Chaucer in his *Wife of Bath’s Tale*: “And if that she be riche of heigh parage, Thanne seistow that it is a tormentrye To suffre hir pryde and hir malencolye. (And if that she be rich, of high parage (birth), Then sayst thou that it is a tormentrye To suffer her pride and her melancholy).” As stated, this use contains a more negative connotation in terms of emotions than today’s definition of melancholy, as we would not often say one suffers another’s melancholy.

Around the 15th century the connotation of melancholy began to change noticeably, shifting from simply negative, irritable emotions to something more introspective and perhaps a sign of artistic or intellectual talent, as revealed by the third definition in the OED, which describes melancholy as “sadness, dejection, esp. of a pensive nature; gloominess; pensiveness or introspection; an inclination or tendency to this.” In a curious note, the definition also mentions that “In the Elizabethan period, and for some

centuries thereafter, the affectation of melancholy was a fashionable mark of intellectual or aesthetic refinement.”

The reason for this shift isn't certain, though many speculations exist. It is more widely known today that people with marked intellect and especially artistic ability often suffer more from mental disorders, and that they are affected by spells of “moodiness” or melancholy is no surprise. I say this because this awareness most likely became more widespread and associated with such qualities during the Western Renaissance due to its greater profusion of art both visual and literary. This idea is supported by the work of one art historian, Roy Strong, who traced this change in connotation to the writings of humanist Marsilio Ficino: “Ficino transformed what had hitherto been regarded as the most calamitous of all the humours into the mark of genius. Small wonder that eventually the attitudes of melancholy soon became an indispensable adjunct to all those with artistic or intellectual pretensions.”

Ficino came to hold this view through his study of and belief in Neoplatonism, a philosophy which often described the concept of witnessing perfect divine beauty via the senses as sort of “mania” which afflicted the artist and was in fact due to their astronomical sign given at the time of birth. “Saturn determines the melancholic temperament; depending on Saturn's conjunction at the moment of birth, the *melancholicus* will be either sane and capable of rare accomplishment or sick and condemned to inertia and stupidity,” according to Ficino. The two, however, do not seem mutually independent of each other, and with the acceleration of arts such as painting during the Renaissance, it the link between the two and their blending was observable in many artists. Indeed, this artistic connotation remained vogue from the Renaissance through the Romantic era and was expressed by individuals and groups alike through their artistic work, such as the Post-Elizabethan cult of melancholia or wood-engraver and painter Albrecht Durer, who in his famous 1514 piece *Melencolia I* shows the artist in a state of melancholia waiting for inspiration to strike.

This artistic link to melancholia was relatively steady until around the 20th century. Due to advances in psychology which recognized melancholic tendencies as signs of mental instabilities, “melancholy” in the sense of “intense sadness” slowly gave way to the term “depression” and its scientific connotations, which was and is used to characterize the mental illness we recognize as depression today. However, the word in its current state still holds on to its artistic influence and the feelings that art often inspires, even if those feelings aren't necessarily happy, for many people believe pleasure can be taken from a certain kind of sadness.

This definition is captured by one of the latest definitions in the OED, which states that melancholy is a “tender, sentimental, or reflective sadness; sadness giving rise to or considered as a subject for poetry, sentimental reflection, etc., or as a source of aesthetic pleasure.” This definition encapsulates a joy in sadness derived from artistic pleasure and nostalgic contemplation, such as the feelings experienced when gazing over a vast, lonely forest, walking along a beach lost in thought, or nostalgically remembering events from childhood. In this sense, melancholy seems to involve a state of brooding and aloneness, but perhaps not necessarily

loneliness, and the presence of or concentration of something perceived as beautiful, a far cry from the “black bile” described by ancient Greeks and a much more poetic one at that. Speaking of poetry, the final and most recent definition of melancholy in the OED is art itself, as a term used to describe a “short literary composition (usually poetical) of a sad or mournful character.”

The process of melancholy’s transformation from a harsher emotion to a more introverted, reflective, and creative one is fascinating, albeit not without the cruel cost that so often plagues genius. Melancholy and its effects have brought about the ends of some of the greatest figures of art, music, and writing, as well as many others. Indeed, it seems it often takes immense personal suffering to birth the beauty we often take for granted.

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